

# **ERADICATING SEXUAL ABUSE AND GENDER BASED VIOLENCE IN AFRICA AND AMERICA: ROLE OF RELIGIOUS LEADERS**

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## **Abstract**

This paper examines the responsibility of religious leaders in protecting sexual and gender based violence in Africa and America. The paper adopted a qualitative approach that utilized secondary sources and participant observation method in gathering and analysing of data. The paper observed that sexual and gender violence is endemic in Africa and American societies. The paper recommends among others, that the government should formulate policies that would both guide against sexual harassment and gender based violence as well as empowers women to participate actively in the formulation of policies and governance in Africa and America.

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**Keywords:** Religious Leaders, Sexual Violence and Gender Violence

## **Introduction**

Sexual and gender based violence are the current issues confronting the world today. In many parts of the world, including Africa and America sexual and gender based violence have both theological and cultural roots that date back to the origin of mankind (Angaegbu, 1997). The theological root of sexual and gender based violence in African and American culture for example, is rich with evidence of male dominion. Akpan (2000) asserts that the review of the concept of culture formation in African and American and in most parts of the world show that women are ascribed as subordinate status and are sexually abused by male counterparts. Bella (1970) also claimed that this is rooted in the social, economic and political structures of the women who are reproduced by socialization process.

Although African and American cultures prefer harmonious balance between the sexes and equality before the Supreme Being, there is in practice, a lot of prejudice, attitude and custom that negates this philosophy of women equality with men. Even in the case of family setting, socialization contributes significantly to sexual and gender based violence.

This seemingly innocuous action psychologically prepares the male gender to be tougher or look down on female gender as their property, while the female counterparts are being treated and psychologically positioned as weakling. The denial of women rights, participation in economic and political developments are all clear cases of gender discrimination and violence against the female counterparts. Thus, the summation of what African and American women to some extent have to offer remains systematically excluded from the development agenda. This calls for a change of world view of African and American people concerning gender discrimination and violence in contemporary times.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The key concepts that need clarifying are: religious leaders, sexual violence and gender violence.

### **Religious Leaders**

Religious leader is by definition one that provides followers with clear course of action which will gain their commitments and serve their individual objectives as well as the higher objectives of the organization (Anyanwu, 1999). A religious leader is therefore someone who is chosen by God through the members to lead the organization and to ensure that individuals and groups objectives are fulfilled (Ushe, 2010). One can become a religious leader through four means namely: birth right, appointment, self-appointment and election. Leadership by birth right means that one is succeeding to a throne simply because he/she is a member of the ruling family. For example, Kings, Sultans, Emirs, Traditional Rulers, among others are leaders that come to powers by birth rights. Religious leadership by election means one is chosen among others, by a group to lead. Such an election might be through open or secret ballot. Leadership by appointment means one is appointed by a superior or a governing body. While leadership by self-appointment means that one assumes the mantle of leadership through persecution or manipulation of emotions or by force of the gun. Examples of this abound in African societies.

Religious leadership in the true sense of the world thus, needs basic requirements to function effectively in discharging his duties. Some of these requirements include

1. He must be a person, who can work well with others, or realizes that the growth as well as the successes of the organization depends, not only on his/her skills and energies but also on the combined and supportive efforts of others. Virtually all the characteristic religious leaders have understood this crucial factors of collegiality spirit, moral and commitment on the part of the citizenry. Thus, the charismatic

religious leaders like Jesus, Paul, Napoleon, Teddy Roosevelt, Mohammed and a host of others all devoted great attentions to team spirit, namely: the individual and collective attitude of oneness (Atado, 1991). It is an attitude of belonging and identification with the group which enhanced national development.

2. A person to elect as a religious leader must sensitive of doing unto others what he wants people to do unto him. A sensitive religious leader does unto others what he expects others to do unto him. His resentments to others are feeling, operations, rights, and needs because he/she expect them to do the same to him. There are two aspects of this attribute; first, it demanded on the part of the religious leader certain openness to the feelings of those under his or her direction. Second, it presupposes that the way in which he/she as a religious leader seeks to discover group's attitudes will be orderly, objective and not based on hearsay, surface impressions or the articulate objectives of a vocal minority (Bothwell and Davenport, 1983).
3. He or she must be open minded and willing to listen and truly hear what the masses are saying. Otherwise, he/she becomes a dictator and one moving alone without consultation bulldozing ahead regardless of reluctance within the general people. A sensitive religious leader is slow to pass judgment on others. Rather, he/she listens to and sympathizes with others. More importantly, he/she nurtures an environment that continually satisfies the needs and expectations of others (Nimeh, 1965). Other characters of a religious leader are: Humanity, vision, courage, honour and accountability any good religious leader must possess these basic qualities before he/she is elected to the position of leadership (Ikenga-Metuh, 1992). A vision religious leader is one that creates a future from a montage of current facts, hopes, dreams, danger and opportunities. In other words, a religious leader must have a picture of the future and glimpse of what ought to be done. His vision is tested by his ability to take risks, face unpleasant situation without panic make firm decisions when necessary, even if they are unpopular.
4. The courage of a religious leader makes him/her to lead his/her followers to the Promised Land. Religious leadership requires courage to assume certain risks at great personal or professional cost.
5. A religious leader must be humorous. He should be a person who can smile with his/her subjects. An Indian proverb says: "he who cannot smile should not keep a shop" (Atado, 1991). Every religious leader that sells his/her ideas to followers and also buys ideas from them, and to be keeping his/her leadership shop, the religious leader must be able to smile to drive away tensions, anxieties, worries, disappointments

and frictions. A religious leader who is always wearing a tough face succeeds in scaring away followers. Honour is needed as a condiment and a stimulant in the art of leadership as observed by Oswald Sanders thus: “wholesome humor will relax tension and relieve a difficult situation” (Bothwell, 1983). These listed qualities are necessary for the position of religious leadership, without them, a religious leader is bound to be corrupt, insensitive and without vision for general development of the society.

### **Sexual Violence**

Sexual violence refers to sexual activity where consent is not obtained or freely given (John Paul II). The National Centre on Elder Abuse describes sexual violence as “the abuse of sex and “non-consenting sexual contact of any kind” including unwanted touching; sexual assault or battery, such as rape, sodomy, and coerced nudity; sexually explicit photographing; and sexual contact with any person incapable of giving consent. Jurisdictions and agencies define “elder” differently but typically as commencing at the age of 60 or 65 (Oduyoye, 1996). The victims who experience sexual violence are mostly female. The person responsible for the violence is typically male and is usually someone known to the victim. The person can be, a friend, co-worker, neighbour, or family member.

Sexual violence includes: unwanted touching and rape, includes physical contact. Sexual violence can impact health in many ways. Some ways are serious and can lead to long-term health problems such as chronic pain, headaches, stomach problems, and sexually transmitted diseases (Atado, 1991). Sexual violence can have an emotional impact as well. Victims often are fearful and anxious. They may replay the attack over and over in their minds. They may have problems with trust and be wary of becoming involved with others. The anger and stress that victims feel may lead to eating disorders and depression. Some even think about or attempt suicide.

Sexual violence is linked to sexual abuse and negative health behaviours. For example, victims are more likely to smoke; abuse alcohol, use drugs, and engage in risky sexual activity. Sexual violence is a significant problem in Africa and United States. Among high school students surveyed nationwide, about 8% reported having been forced to have sex. The percentage of those having been forced to ever have sex was higher among female (11%) than male (5%) students. An estimated 20% to 25% of college women in the United States have experienced an attempted or complete rape during their college career. Nearly 1 in 5 women and 1 in 71 men in the United States have been raped at some time in their lives. These numbers underestimate the problem.

Many cases are not reported because victims are afraid to tell the police, friends, or family about the abuse (Bothwell, 1983). Victims also think that their stories of abuse will not be believed and that police cannot help them. They may be ashamed or embarrassed. Victims may also keep quiet because they have been threatened with further harm if they tell anyone. Certain factors can increase the risk for sexual abuse. However, the presence of these factors does not mean that sexual abuse will occur (Sukhdeo, 2006). Sexual violence can affect individuals across the lifespan, including people in later life. Many older victims have survived multiple victimizations over the course of their lives. Recognition of sexual violence against people in later life is hindered by misconceptions that older adults are not sexual beings or sexually desirable and that rape is a crime of passion.

Some of the signs and symptoms of sexual violence against people in later life include:

Genital injuries, human bite marks, imprint injuries, and bruising on thighs, buttocks, breasts, face, neck, and other. Other signs and symptoms of sexual violence are: Fear, anxiety, mistrust, and dramatic changes in victims' behaviour, eyewitness reports and disclosures by victims, observed suspicious behaviour of perpetrators by others, It is likely that sexual violence against people in later life is highly underreported (Hutchinson, 1998). These signs are symptoms are commonly found among victims of sexually abused genders worldwide.

### **Gender Violence**

The word gender comes from the Middle English gender, a loanword from Norman-conquest-era Old French. This, in turn, came from Latin genus. Both words mean 'kind', 'type', or 'sort'. They derive ultimately from a widely attested Proto-Indo-European (PIE) root which is also the source of kin, kind, king, and many other English words.<sup>[10]</sup> It appears in Modern French in the word genre (type, kind, also genre sexual and is related to the Greek root gen to produce, appearing in gene, genesis, and oxygen. As a verb, it means breed in the King James Bible. Gender discrimination (also known as gender inequality, gender egalitarianism, or sexual inequality) therefore refers to the sex discrimination stemming from a belief in the injustice of myriad forms of gender inequality.

The word violence on the other hand denotes any kind of behaviour that one person uses to control another through fear and intimidation (Kukah, 2002). It includes emotional and psychological abuse, battering, sexual assault and acid attacks (Ugwu, 2002). Gender violence against women refers to all forms of inhuman conditions targeted at a particular sex such as oppressions, adverse conditions and inhuman treatments against

women or womanhood (ECA-WIDNET, 1979). In the context of this paper therefore, gender based violence can be defined as:

Any act of gender-based violence that results in physical, sexual and psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty in public or private life. It encompasses physical, sexual and psychological evidence occurring in the family, including battering, sexual abuse of female children in the household, dowry related violence, marital rape, female mutilation, sexual harassment and intimidation at work, in educational institution, in religious worship and elsewhere, trafficking in women and forced prostitution (Kukah, 2002).

The harmful effects of these violence result in the humiliation, open ridicule and torture of women in African and American societies (Ugwu, 2002). The lacks of laws that prohibit violence against women and the failure to enforce or promote awareness of existing laws have been detrimental to the protection of women or men against acts of brutality. Lack of sensitivity towards women or men in the media has adverse impacts on teenage girls who in most cases fall victims of rape or adoption by their male counterparts in many cultures of African and American societies. There are dehumanizing cultural practices such as widowhood rites and female genital mutilation that are acts of violence against women. Available statistics gathered by the International Centre of Research on women (ICRW) in 1999 indicates that in Africa and America one out of every three women has suffered violence in an intimate relationship at some point in her life. This statics is an average based on available national surveys across industrialized and developing countries (Pratt, 1947).

### **An Overview of Sexual and Gender Based Violence in Africa and America**

Some indigenous or cultural practices and acts linked to race, tribe, sex, language and religion have lowered the status of African and American women. This discrimination against women has its roots from the creation account where a woman was fashioned out of man's rib. Many scholars vehemently opposed to the possession of woman in the full human nature with man. While some scholars upheld the equality of gender in the identical human nature of male and female created in the image of God, this however, poses the problem of sexual and gender based violence in African and American societies. There are traditionalists who proposed gender inequality of women in African and American societies. In their view points, women are subordinate to men because they were created out of men's ribs and as such they are property of the men.

This outmoded notion about women still exists in many cultures of African and American societies. These false beliefs include: A man has right over the body of woman, every woman must depend on a male provider, it is a waste to educate women since they get married and so forth. Tradition and religion also teach women to stick to their husbands, to suffer in silence and to endure everything so as to save their families. Women have inadequate legal protection because issues involving husband and wife are culturally considered “private” and hence, no one would like to interfere in the private affairs of home (ECA-WIDNET, 1997). Even the laws have their limitations. In most cases customary law, dowry land ownership, inheritance and naming of children discriminate against women in African and American societies. This sometimes leads to disfigurement, lost opportunities and interference with confidence of women in the society at large. The consequences of these are that the women may fly into a rage and isolate themselves from male gender. Many may even think that men are meant to dominate and control women (US Bishops, 1992).

Sexual and gender based violence occurs in families, religious institutions, work places and educational institutions. In Africa and America they are committed mostly against women and have great impacts on their social status in the society. Sexual and gender based violence take place in three major forms: physical violence, sexual violence and psychological violence. These forms of violence cut across racial, cultural and religious backgrounds. Kratcoski (1985) asserts that violence on a spouse; children and siblings have been described as symptomatic breakdown of social control. Amnesty International (2007) in its publication, reported that nearly two-thirds of women in Africa and America are believed to have experienced physical, sexual and psychological violence. They are beaten and punished for supposed transgressions, raped and even murdered by men. In some cases, vicious acid attacks leave them with horrific disfigurements (Uchem, 2002).

Sexual and gender based violence are frequently excused and tolerated in the communities where women are assigned inferior roles, subordinate to the male who are heads of the families and effectively the property of their husbands (Murphy, 1997). Husbands are responsible for most of these violence and they are affected to an extent in a lesser degree. Sexual and gender based violence affects everybody including children who are traumatized by the abuse. Thus, sexual and gender based violence have broader spectrum which includes child abuse, elder abuse and violent acts between family members (Tjaden and Thoennes, 2006). Sexual and gender based violence consist of many types such as spouse/partner abuse, child abuse, elder abuse, parent abuse, emotional abuse, economic abuse, social abuse, stalking, physical abuse, sexual abuse and neglect. This violence is

perpetuated by persons, systems and structures created and operated by human beings (Ugwu, 2002).

Thus, there is a personal and systematic, structural and institutional dimension of the problem. There are two sides to the problem: why men harass women sexually and why women seem to accept the beating and stay. Psychologists and domestic violence counsellors explain that violence is learned behaviour. In many cases, men who become abusive and women who are abused grew up in homes where violence occurred. In such a situation, a child can grow up believing that violence is acceptable behaviour. Many boys may learn that this is a way to be powerful (Agbasiere, 2000). If a boy child rose in a home with physical abuse, he is more likely to use sexual violence in his own family (US Bishop, 1992). On the other hand, some psychiatrists hold that in a very small percentage of cases a psychological disorder may trigger sexual violent behaviour.

However, in the majority of cases, other reasons can explain men's abusive behaviour. Men who abuse women convince themselves that they have a right to do so. Abuse men tend to be extremely jealous, possessive and easily angered (US Bishops, 1992). Many flew into a rage because their spouse called her mother too often or because she did not fulfil his expectation in a particular area, and may try to isolate their wives by limiting their contact with family and friends. These kinds of men have low self-esteem and feel vulnerable and powerless. They are more likely to have experienced violence in childhood, and pin the blame for their abusive behaviours on someone or something other than themselves. Alcohol is a strong contributory factor in many cases of domestic violence in Australia.

Many women stay with their abusive partners and the seeds for sexual abuse is sown early in the women's lives. In many African and American communities, the discrimination against women begins even before they are born. Female children are implicitly rejected by their families' quest for male child and the woman she later becomes to not value herself enough as to stand on her own dignity and insist on being respected (John Paul II, 1988). Religious programming also binds women into accepting humiliation as if it is the same as the Christian virtue of humanity (Murphy, 1997). Women often blame themselves for acts committed against them instead of recognizing that no one deserves violence. Because of the social belief that it is culturally permissible for a husband to beat up or sexually abuse his wife or a father to beat his children, women ought not to complain. After a long time of being abused, women may become accustomed to it and fearful and therefore unable to take steps to leave the situation of abuse. Most of them do not know that there is sometimes a possibility of gathering justice from the police or the courts.



Sexual and gender based violence can said to be physical brutality by men when they are treated without love and care. This may be in form of rape and violation of their sexual rights (Mutanga, 2006). Rape subjugates the women, robs them of their dignity and mocks them in the face of society (Galtung, 1990). The atrocity when committed in front of the man as an instrument of violence against them, further deepens the pain. Most often this is done by men to show their superiority over the women. The trauma and stigma often haunt the women for the rest of their lives. Many African and American societies consider women to be inferior and weak, while the men are the decision makers (Dayo, 2006). This wrong conception of women and violation of their human rights by Nigerians originated from considering them as property of men (Uchem 2002).

The belief is also rooted in patriarchy where the power (and rule) of the fathers or men through ritual, tradition, law and language, customs, education, and the division of labour) determine what part women shall or shall not play and in which the female is everywhere subsumed under the male (ECA-WIDNET, 1997). This philosophical thought socializes women to remain “silent” and in most cases promotes social inequalities between men and women. This leads to women’s subordination not only within the family but also in the society and in the church as a whole (ECA-WIDNET, 1997). Female circumcision is the worst form of gender violence and it has root in ancient traditional culture and religious practices of African people, especially the western part of the continent. Blood and Wolf (1960) assert that the practice is most prevalent among the African and American people such as the Yorubas.

In Africa for example, female genital mutilation cases are high especially in Nigeria with a prevalence rate of 95.7 percent, 93.3 and 82.6 respectively (Anozie 2009). According to a study carried out by the United Nations Children’s Funds (UNICEF), the practice of female genital mutilation in Northern states like Kebbi, Sokoto and Katsina is relatively low, recording 1.0 percent, 1.1 percent and 0.0 percent prevalence rate respectively, while southern states like Delta, Cross River, Imo and Anambra States have very high number of female genital mutilation cases (Akpan, 2000). These figures are lower when compared with what is obtained in American society. Sexual and gender based violence subjects the women to emotional and psychological tortures leading to frustrations or even death. In many cultures of Africa and America, widows are typical examples of those who suffer most psychological violence. Sometimes, the widows are subjected to a number of oppressive and dehumanizing treatments.

Unlike African cultures, who compelled the widows to sleep on bare floor, wear rags, eat food from broken, unwashed plates, does not wash her

body for several days or weeks, forced the widows to drink water that was used to wash the late husband's corpse, take the oath publicly to prove their innocence of not been responsible for the husband death, loses their rights to the deceased property or male children automatically died if she refuses to take the oath or drink the water used in washing the husband's corpse, the Americans also subjected the widows to psychological tortures (Akpan, 2000). In some African cultures, the widows are expected to mourn her husband's death for a period of time and throughout this period she must wear dresses that depicted their mood of mourning. The widow wore black clothes and she is not permitted to step out of the house for forty days or to cook or to touch any food meant for another member of the family. The widow is seen as unclean until she has undergone all the relevant traditional rites.

In Calabar, Cross River state of Nigeria for example, the widows have no rights to their husband's estate. A widow who remarries forfeits the right to her husband's property. Although the customary laws which governs most marriages in Africa and America forbids a wife from owning property of independent of the husband, many African and American women have condemned this practice in every strong terms. Islamic marriages thus, confer more rights to the husband's properties than customary marriages. In Islamic law, a widow is entitled to one quarter of the deceased husband's property. But if the deceased has children and grand-children, the widow would be entitled to one-eighth of the property. On the contrary, since Christian marriages are governed by statutory laws which guarantee some measures of legal equality in respect to property ownership most African and American societies usually invoke customary laws to inherent the property of the deceased.

In Africa and America sexual violent acts such as marital rape, adoption, sexual harassment at work, within educational institutions or religious institutions, child marriage, forced prostitution or trafficking in women are harmful traditional practices that violate the fundamental human rights of women and limits the development of their capabilities and integration into the country's development process. Thus, in Africa early or forced marriage enjoys legal backing in Sharia Law as practiced in Northern Nigeria and among some Muslim communities of South-Western Nigeria. Child marriage reveals the low status to which women and young girls have been relegated and the wide spread assumption that women have no alternative roles other than housekeeping and child-bearing (Nkwocha, 2000). According to the civil liberty organization study, most parents give out their daughters for early marriages because they want to protect family honour by preventing teenage pregnancy. And since there is yet no known

law to check the harmful practice of early marriage, many young girls fell victims of such practices in many societies of the world, including Africa.

### **Causes of Sexual and Gender Based Violence in Africa and America**

There are many causes of sexual and gender based violence in the world, especially Africa and America today. Notably among them are:

- (i) The unequal relationship between men and women in the society and the church. By nature, our being male and female has no intrinsic hierarchy. What we call women's place in one human culture is man's place in another. There is nothing permanent about human beings as culturally defined. Neither men nor women should be tied to predetermined roles. Women are often violated upon when defined by their sexual and rational roles only, while prominence is given to other adventures or masculine roles for men (Godsmith, 2000). The same thing goes for the many proverbs and metaphors, generalizations and stereo types that idealize women (Ugwu, 2002).
- (ii) When a man feels the need to control and dominate the woman. When the husband feels such need to control his wife because of low self-esteem, extreme jealousy, difficulty in regulating his anger and other strong emotions, or when he feels inferior to his wife in education and socio-economic background, he employs violence as a tool. Some men with traditional beliefs may think they have the right to control women, and that women are not equal to men Gelles, 1977). This domination takes the form of emotional, physical or sexual violence.
- (iii) Interaction of situational and individual factors. This means that abusers learn violent behaviours from their family, people in their community and other cultural influences as they grow up. They may have seen violence often or they may have been victims themselves. Such abusers may learn to believe that violence is a reasonable way of controlling a woman (Afro news, 2007). Thus, men who learn that women are not to be valued or respected and who see sexual and gender based violence directed against women are more likely to abuse when (Anozie, 2009). Women who also witness violence against women in their families of origin are more likely to be victimized by their own husbands (UNICEF, 2001).
- (iv) Poor communication between couples. Sexual and gender based violence arose from poor communication between married couples. According to Zamani (2003), the inability to share thoughts and feelings or solicit each other understands on matters of personal idiosyncrasies, gives rise to conflict, marital disharmony, undue suspicion or promotion of malice between them. At the slightest provocation, sexual and gender based violence erupts and deals a severe blow to the hitherto blissful marital relationship.

(v) Immaturity on the part of man or both couples. Immaturity of couples also instigates sexual and gender based violence between them due to lack of appropriate problem-solving and decision-making skills.

As immature personalities they misinterpret each other's action or pronouncement. They may resort to heated arguments, rather than meaningful dialogue to resolve their differences, most often than not, these degenerate into gender based violence, sexual denials, among others. This can threatened marital harmony and affect the relationship between men and women in the society (Blood and Wolf, 1960). Thus, the effects of violence against women are broadly grouped into three: Physical, psychological and spiritual impacts.

### **Physical Impact**

Physical impact has to do with injuries which can lead to permanent disabilities in women or even leads to death of a woman. Sometimes, physical violence on a woman can lead to miscarriage of forced abortion and unwanted pregnancies. Sexual violence against women increases women's vulnerability to STD and HIV/AIDS (UNIFEM, 2002). Some victims of violence often time than not commit suicide. Many women die following a beating by their own husbands, and in most cases, the husband's free afterwards. The husband's who are taken to court are not given an adequate sentence for having killed a person. In the case of sexual violation, it may precondition the women to turn to prostitution, to become violent, have too many children, abuse alcohol or drug, leave the home, and in the case of widows, lose all the property (ECA-WIDNET, 1997).

### **Psychological Impact**

Intense fear that the violence will happen again is generated in the woman. Low self-esteem, guilt, shame and depression also result; like wish feelings of being unjustly treated and helpless. There may be accompanied by feelings of hatred and the desire for revenge.

### **Spiritual Impact**

Women experience a hunger for human and spiritual understanding and care, a Christ-like acceptance and support. The feel not appreciated in the society and not recognized in the church but rather exploited (ECA-WIDNET, 1997). In this case of girl-children, on the whole it may lead disfigurement, lost opportunities, and interference with school work. They may lose confidence in themselves and in death and adults. As young, women may also avoid marriage. When the woman is a mother and the violence takes place in front of her children, the stage is set for a cycle of violence that may be continued from generation. The children witnessing

violence against their mother may grow up thinking that violence against women is normal, thereby perpetuating another generation of violence in African and American societies (ECA-WIDNET, 1997).

### **The Role of Religious Leaders in Eradicating Sexual and Gender Based Violence in Africa and America**

Religious leaders have the force of eradicating sexual and gender based values in human society. Ugwu (2002) asserts that in many cultures of the world, appreciation of the important of religious leaders have caused many people, especially “women liberation theologians” and “feminists” in recent times to pause about the responsibility of religious leaders in eradicating sexual and gender based violence. Agbasiere (2000) corroborated that religious leaders who are looked upon have always been a vital tool in eradicating sexual and gender based violence in African and American societies. The responsibility of religious leaders is so important that it act as social machinery without which the social protection against sexual and gender based violence in modern civilization would have been impossible.

Religious leaders have the duty of edifying the people’s culture and belief systems to discourage sexual and gender based violence in the society. All religions whether revealed or non-revealed are opposed to sexual and gender based violence. Our ignorance about sexuality and the nature of women are a potent factors responsible for sexual and gender based violence in African and American societies. Since religion promotes gender equality and peaceful co-existence among members in the society, it will be unwise for anyone to ignore the influence of religious leaders as vital forces for eradicating sexual and gender based violence in African and American societies (Zamani, 2000).

Religious leaders enhance self understanding rationally and psychologically guarantee a healthy relationship with their male counterparts and vice versa. The effective eradicating of sexual and gender based violence should involve both government and non-governmental organizations (NGOS) against these vices. The government should on his part promulgate into law international declarations, conventions and resolutions on women’s rights where the laws of the land do not or make offences against women judiciable in court (Zamani, 2000). Religious agencies and non-governmental organizations such as National Orientation Agency, Win and Women’s Right Advancement and Protection Alternative’s (WRAPA) should as their primary missions improve the social welfare-and legal rights of Nigerian women, by removing various forms of deprivations, discriminations and degradation that make it difficult for women to contribute rightfully to national development (Agbasiere, 2000).

There is need for scholars, religionists, traditional and religious leaders to take phenomenological and non-violence approaches to eradication of sexual and gender based violence in Africa and America. These approaches should be based on traditional moral values, communication and dialogue, love, mutual respect and collegiality spirit to eradicate sexual and gender based violence. Any religious leaders or traditions that seek inequality, and promote sexual and gender based violence are unforgivable and should be discarded in all ramifications as crime against women. Religious leaders who are engaged in education of the Youths and in moulding of public opinions should promote gender equality. This is the only path possible where justice, solidarity, universal brotherhood and sisterhood could be achieved. All religions affirmed the fact that men and women were created equal. Christianity for example, maintains that men and women were created in the image of God to multiply and fill the earth. The book of Genesis 1:27 states thus: “God created man in his image. In the image of God he created him. Male and female, he created them.

This identical human nature which appears in the two different forms of male and female indicates that women possess equal human nature perfectly to men before the creator. As a sovereign being, women are not subordinate to man more than they subordinate to them; they are free and independent as the men. Pope John Paul II (1988) asserts that both men and women are human beings to equal degree. The women have full and equal human rights and responsibilities both politically, economically, culturally and socially as benefits the human persons. All women and men are individuals worthy of respect and dignity even in terms of sexual rights. Jesus unfailingly respected the human dignity of women and went off his way to help the most vulnerable women.

## **Conclusion**

From the foregoing discussion, it is clearly seen that sexual and gender based violence are social vices that are endemic in the society today. Sexual and gender based violence whether directly or indirectly, are crimes against human dignity and thus, dehumanizes the status of women. Although it is argued that women are not the only targets of sexual and gender based violence in African and American societies, the number of cases of women seems to be more than that of men. Just as many ladies are humiliated by their husbands, more men die every year in cases of domestic violence. Some of the women poison their husband’s food, beat them up or cut off their husband’s genital while they were fast asleep. This shows that violence is not strictly a gender issue. Both men and women fall victims of it in the modern society and the case of Africa and America is not an

exception. In view of the above discussion, the paper makes the following recommendations:

- (i) The government should established psychological and professional units at the relevant centres to educate people on the consequences of sexual and gender based violence in African and American societies.
- (ii) The government should enact laws that would seriously check the menace of sexual and gender based violence in Africa and other parts of the world where it is not visible.
- (iii) Leaders of different religious institutions should uphold gender equality and de-emphasised sexual and gender based violence in the society.
- (iv) The various religions in Africa (Islam, Christianity and African Traditional Religion) should advocate for women's proper recognition by the society and in religious organizations in such a manner that equal opportunities are given to both men and women for the contribution and transformation of the society.
- (v) There is need for dialogue and non-violence approach in promoting gender equality in the global society.

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